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Too Many Churches?

By Rev. Thomas M. Smith

I have been wondering for a few years why there are so many Christian churches in Vacaville. The vast majority of these congregations believe that the Bible is the Word of God, an authority for our life, and participate in the effort to bring people to a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. That is, the majority of the Christian churches in Vacaville subscribe to traditional, historic doctrinal orthodoxy, and would be known as evangelical within the context of all Christian churches throughout the world. By my count, we have 37 such congregations in this town. Why?

My answer to 'why not?' is that so many congregations demonstrate a poor stewardship of resources. Of course, God may do whatever he wishes, and there is some value in exemplifying different historical strands. My congregation, for instance, maintains emphasis on the truths and worship of the Reformation begun in Germany and Switzerland and carried to Scotland and eventually across the Atlantic Ocean on the Mayflower. The Christian Life Center carries forth the Pentecostal movement begun in early 20th century America (though the early Pentecostals were reluctant to form separate churches, hoping to transform existing congregations). Episcopal churches are part of the Anglican Communion which, arguably, began with a political act by Henry VIII who achieved a divorce from Catherine of Aragon by detaching England from obedience to the Pope. The Southern Baptist Convention owes its roots to a spin-off of the Great Awakening in New England (1725-1760), whereby Shubal Stearns took his amazing evangelistic gifts to the South and preached.

Yet, beyond the wonderful history lessons there remains question for today ... why do we have (or need) so many churches, most of which believe in basically the same things? I was at a meeting of the local ministerial association a few years ago and sat across from a well-known local pastor. After some conversation, I inquired how his church was different from another (separate) church in town, in that his theology and ministry sounded pretty similar. He told me that his church was a part of that larger group some 60 years before, but that some leaders got into a fight and decided to split off and be independent.

In conversations with my Presbyterian colleagues, I often find myself challenging the notion that we need to have a Presbyterian congregation in a particular locality. They say, 'We need a Presbyterian presence in Dixon.' I say, 'Why? I mean, the better question is to ask whether there is a Christ-based congregation in Dixon that is preaching the Gospel and demonstrating the presence of the kingdom of God? If there is such a 'church ministering to the lost and the saved in the town of Dixon, why do we need a Presbyterian church there?'

Aside from the value of ministering to an immigrant group or some other highly specialized sub-group within society, what Christians should be about is finding our identity in Christ. We do ministry with our people so that they might minister to our

world. Our identity should come from our primary relationship with Jesus Christ, not a historical label.

You will say, "Yes, but there are so many people in Vacaville who do not go to church or who do not know the Gospel, so there is always a need for more churches, who will (obviously) reach more people with the Good News!' And I will say, 'well, maybe.' I think we know there will always be people who will reject the Gospel, or who will be indifferent to the Gospel, that is, Christians in Vacaville will never bring everyone to Christ. In any case, it is the Holy Spirit who convicts of sin and brings a person to salvation.

My problem is that I believe there is a drastically reduced economy of effort when we have so many congregations that are so alike. We would be far better stewards of God's resources if like-minded congregations merged their ministries. Surely, there are not 37 different approaches at work in Vacaville!

We mimic the values of the world when we begin new congregations simply to give work to new pastors who come out of colleges and seminaries looking for a job. We mimic the values of the world when we plant new congregations near ones that are struggling, and in need of strong leaders who are now spread between many small fellowships, ostensibly to reach more people for the Gospel.

I believe that the law of diminishing returns applies - that at some point, more isn't better. And I believe that Satan uses our disorganization and our (largely) unchallenged propensity to begin new congregations to confuse and humor the non-Christian population in our city. The Word does not exhort Christians to bring people to Christ - the exhortation is to make disciples. That is much harder than witnessing or scaring the bejebbers out of somebody. And the process of disciple-making requires resources which are limited by the competing interests of so many churches. I have no solution other than to urge any colleagues and their ruling or governing boards to evaluate whether you are following the 'success models' of the world, or conceptualizing a vision of the church whereby Christ-based congregations use resources wisely.

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